THE TWELVE DAYS OF STELLA

TERA LYNN CHILDS

The Twelve Days of Stella

Stella looked around the room that had been her home for all eighteen years of her life and thought of everything she would miss when she went away to college next Fall. The white canopy bed with sheer pink drapes and orchid silk bedding. The full-length mirror surrounded by twinkling white fairy lights that made her feel like a princess every time she checked her reflection--like she did now. The mural she and her mom had started the winter before she turned ten. It was the one thing she could not take with her and the one thing she would miss the most.

"You're being silly," Stella told her reflection. "Oxford is months away. Besides,"--she smoothed an errant strand of honey-blonde hair--"you can always autoport home whenever you want."

Her gaze shifted to the reflected view of the unfinished forest scene on her wall. A happy composition of deep green pine trees, rainbow colored songbirds, smiling woodland creatures, and the glow of tree faeries among the branches. That winter they had spent hour after hour painting, while Daddy worked tirelessly on his new curriculum for the Academy. Hours of laughing and sweating and painting each other on the nose. The memories were that much sweeter because they were the last she would ever have of her mother.

After the funeral Stella had never picked up a paintbrush again.

A knock at her door startled her out of her sad thoughts and she quickly wiped at the tears stinging her eyes. How foolish she was being, crying over a past she could never change. The Christmas season must be making her nostalgic.

"Um ... Stella?" her new stepsister Phoebe called out.

She sounded nervous. Never good.

"I have an itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny problem and I could use your help." She paused

before adding, "You might want to bring an umbrella."

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Stella took a deep breath. With Phoebe, the problems were never itsy-bitsy, teenyweeny. Shaking off her melancholy memories, she mentally formed a waterproof

hydrokinesis shield around her body and pulled open the door.

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“Ow!”

Stella winced as something small, round and hard pelted her in the head. And then another. And another. Before a fourth could sting her scalp, she neofactured an umbrella and held it overhead.

She would not admit that she should have heeded Phoebe’s warning.

“Phoebe,” she snapped above the roar of thousands of brightly colored objects raining down on the living room, “what in the name of Hera is happening?”

“I don’t know,” Phoebe shouted back. “I was just sitting on the couch, daydreaming

when these started falling from the sky.”

Phoebe was pressed against the near wall, holding Daddy’s oversized hardcover Atlas of

the Ancient World above her head. The little colorful objects bounced off the book,

springing into the center of the room. Stella held out her hand and captured a few. She

studied her handful, noting that the red, yellow, and green balls each had a little white

S printed on one side.

“Are these--” Stella squinted at her hand. “--candy?”

“Oh shoot!” Phoebe edged away from the wall to stand next to Stella. “They’re Skittles. I

was daydreaming about my favorite candy store, and how they have these beautiful

rainbow colored displays, and how they always remind me of the rainbow of fruit

flavors, and ...” She gestured at the raining candy, as if that should explain it all.

Stella had no idea what Phoebe was talking about. Of course, Stella frequently had no

idea what Phoebe was talking about. She chalked it up to the cultural differences

between girls raised in Greece and California.

But, intrigued by the daydream and the idea of a rainbow-filled candy store, Stella lifted

her hand to her mouth and popped the candy inside. Her tongue exploded in a burst of

flavor. She didn’t think she had ever eaten anything quite as overpoweringly sweet.

She loved it!

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“Stella?” Phoebe shouted.

“Right,” she said, pulling herself out of the candy-induced reverie. With one wave of her hand, the downpour ceased, leaving them standing in three inches of Skittles.

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Stella stirred up the blueberries from the bottom of her yogurt while watching Phoebe shovel the Skittles into garbage bags by the bowlful. Maybe she should give Phoebe a hand, but she was having too much fun watching her stepsister labor over the results of her misfired powers.

“I don’t see why you won’t just zap them all away,” Phoebe complained. “I know you can.”

“Of course I can,” Stella replied between spoonfuls of blueberry yogurt. “But you would hardly learn your lesson if I make your problems disappear. You’re just lucky Daddy’s not here to see the mess.”

She smiled with satisfaction at the look of horror on Phoebe’s face, even if it wasn’t really justified. Although Daddy could be a bit of a stern disciplinarian, he had a soft spot for Phoebe that made Stella’s ears itch. He never let her get away with half the stuff Phoebe did. If Stella had been the one who visiomutated all the water in the house into glitter, she would still be grounded. Just like they were still finding glitter in the bathroom.

Hrmph. Stella would let Phoebe struggle a little longer with the manual Skittles removal before reversing the results of her misfire.

“Hey, what’s this?” Phoebe asked from where she was digging rainbow candy from

beneath the sofa. “They feel like paintings.”

Stella froze.

She had forgotten about the paintings she’d hidden away so she wouldn’t have to face

the reminders of bittersweet memories. Paintings she hadn’t laid eyes on in years. And

now Phoebe was pulling them out into the light.

“Wow,” Phoebe said as she set the paintings onto the sofa and studied them. “They’re

beautiful. Who painted them?”

Stella set her half-eaten yogurt on the kitchen counter and went to stand next to Phoebe.

There were four canvases. The first three were goddess portraits, commissioned by

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Hera, Athena, and Artemis. The fourth was a portrait of a hematheos woman with looseflowing blonde hair, soft gray eyes, and a joyful smile.

“My mom painted those,” Stella answered, pointing at the goddess portraits. Then,

facing the painting she could never bring herself to destroy, she said, “And I painted

that one.”

“Stella ...”

Phoebe’s voice had taken on such a strange tone of awe and surprise that Stella couldn’t

help turning to meet her steady brown gaze.

“That’s amazing.” Phoebe shook her head, like she couldn’t quite fathom the situation.

“I didn’t know you painted.”

Stella looked back at the portrait she’d done, the portrait of her mother.

“I don’t.”

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As Stella flicked her hand at the room, sending the sea of Skittles back into oblivion—except for the jarful she zapped onto her desk ... for later—she wished she’d just cleaned up the mess in the first place. Then she wouldn’t be facing Phoebe’s questioning look about the paintings. But it wasn’t like she had to stay and answer those questions.

“I’m going out for a while,” Stella said as she snatched the portraits off the sofa and headed for her room. “Try not to bring any more plagues to the house before I get back.”

She could practically hear Phoebe’s teeth grinding behind her. That almost made up for her discovering the paintings.

Stella quickly slid the canvases under her bed. They should be safe from Phoebe’s curiosity—and her powers—until Stella could decide what she wanted to do with them.

Now that they’d come out of hiding she couldn’t just put them back and forget.

When she heard Phoebe’s door slam—not an unusual occurrence—Stella stepped into her silver ballet flats. Seconds later she was walking the path to the village, heading for her favorite refuge: the pantheon temple. Perched on a cliff overlooking the gorgeous Aegean below, the pantheon temple was built as a tribute to all the gods and goddesses

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of Olympic descent in an attempt to diffuse any arguments about preferred patron deities and the like. Not that anything could prevent the gods from arguing.

The temple was rarely used anymore. The gods didn't visit the island with any regularity, and the residents didn't feel compelled to pay formal tribute. Which meant that Stella usually found the temple deserted—the perfect environment for clear thinking.

As she climbed the shallow steps and passed through the colonnade to enter the temple proper, she felt a growing sense of calm and clarity. There was something about the brightly colored mural the covered every square inch of the interior walls that just ...

made her smile. It portrayed all the gods and goddesses in their most resplendent glory.

Like a massive and ancient family portrait.

Stella went, as she always did, to stand before the goddess on the far wall. The one wearing a beautiful golden crown, holding a plump pomegranate in her elegant hand, and with a proud peacock lying across her feet. Hera.

It had been years since Stella met with her immortal ancestor. The great deities rarely

left Olympus anymore, and Stella hadn’t had time—or an invitation—to attend their

court. If she couldn’t speak to Hera face-to-face, then this was the next best thing.

She lifted a hand to run her fingertips over the gilded sandals on Hera’s feet, but

stopped when she heard footsteps echoing into the temple.

Startled, she turned to see who else still visited the temple, and was even more shocked

to see Phoebe’s friend, Troy, hurrying inside. He was carrying a cloth bag in his

outstretched hands, eyeing it nervously as if it might bite at any second.

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“Travatas?” Stella asked, trying to determine what might be in the bag. “What are you—“

“Aaaack!” he screamed, dropping the bag and then quickly retrieving it when it started to wriggle away. The bag grasped firmly in one hand, he glared at Stella. “You scared the crap out of me! I didn’t think anyone visited the temple anymore.”

Stella arched a brow. “Neither did I.”

“Oh.” He gave her an apologetic look. “Sorry. I guess you were here first.” Reversing course, he backed toward the door. “I’ll go. Let you finish your, uh—“

“No!” Stella blurted, then readjusted her composure. “I mean, you’re welcome to stay.

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It’s a public place.”

Troy glanced at the bag. “Um, I think I should come back later.” The bag wriggled again. He muttered, “Or maybe not at all.”

Now she was more curious than anything. What was in that bag?

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she insisted, crossing the temple until she stood in front of him at the entrance. “You’re obviously here to,” —she gestured at the wriggling bag—“make an offering of some sort. You should present it.”

Arms crossed over her chest, Stella stifled a laugh at the miserable look on Troy’s face.

He looked like she’d asked him to kiss a frog. But she wanted to know what was wriggling inside that bag, so she adopted her most intimidating look—she had many—and waited. She could sense him weighing his choices. Although she could read his thoughts if she tried—a power she had inherited from her ancestor goddess—she preferred watching and guessing. Made her feel ... more human.

Finally, his shoulders slumped.

“Okay,” he said. “If you’d wait outside, this’ll just take a second.”

Stella shook her head slowly. “No thank you. I won’t be in your way.” She stepped aside and gestured into the temple. “Go ahead.”

To his credit, Troy didn’t waver. He clenched his jaw, gripped the bag tighter, and stalked across the limestone floor. When he reached the section of the mural that represented Asklepios, the god of medicine, he knelt down and pulled at the opening of the bag.

Stella couldn’t contain her gasp when a small green snake slithered out.

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Stella prided herself on her ability to remain calm in every situation. Seeing that little green stripe of reptilian slime

appear out of the bag tested her control to the limit. Ballet flats, she felt sure, were not a significant barrier against snake bites.

"Is that thing dangerous?" she asked, pleased that her voice remained steady.

"No way," Troy replied. But he backed away quickly. "He's grass snake." The snake hissed and Troy jumped back. "Completely," —he swallowed hard —"harmless."

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The snake, perhaps finding the stone floor too cold, slithered back into the bag.

"What are you doing with it?" she asked. "Just leaving it here?"

"No, I'm" —Troy took a step toward the bag—"sending him to Olympus. To Asklepios."

Even though Troy couldn't see her behind him, Stella nodded. The god of medicine was quite fond of snakes, just as Hera was fond of peacocks. Sending a god or goddess a favorite gift was a definite way to gain their favor. Since humans stopped worshipping the gods as deities, they didn't receive nearly enough offerings to sustain their egos.

Stella watched as Troy held out his hands toward the snake-filled bag, a look of intense concentration on his face. His hands glowed. Then the bag disappeared, leaving the snake on the cold floor. Troy twisted his wrists and the snake floated gently into the air, toward the painting of Asklepios. For a moment the snake hovered before the serpentwrapped staff of the medicine god. Then the snake merged into the mural and was gone.

Troy’s entire body sagged with relief.

“Why?” Stella asked.

He turned to face her, his cheeks flushed a deep pink she could see even in the faint

light of the temple. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his cargo shorts before

answering. “I’m ... asking a favor.”

A favor from the god of medicine?

“Is someone sick?” Stella didn’t know Troy well, but her stomach still turned at her next

thought. “Are you sick?”

Troy’s eyes widened. “No, no. Nothing like that.” He squeezed his eyes shut and shook

his head. “It’s stupid,” he explained. “I shouldn’t have even wasted my time. Or,” —he

nodded at the mural—“his.”

“I don’t think you would have gone to the effort of getting the snake if it was stupid.”

Stella didn’t know why she was wasting her time reassuring him, but it distracted her

from her own thoughts so she kept going. “What was the favor?”

Troy groaned and ran a hand over his hair.

“I come from a long line of doctors, you know. Since forever.” He rocked back on his

heels. “But I want to be a musician. I asked for permission to pursue my passion.”

“What if you don’t get it?”

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“I’ll pursue it anyway.” He gave Stella a helpless smile. “You can’t just ignore a passion.”

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Stella considered Troy’s statement. You can’t just ignore a passion. He was willing to face his family’s—and his ancestor god’s—disapproval to pursue the thing he loved the most.

Her mom had felt that way about painting.

Stella wasn’t sure she had that kind of passion. For anything.

“Or who knows,” Troy said with a laugh, interrupting her thoughts. “I’ll probably chicken out and go to med school anyway.”

“No.” She shook her head slowly. “I don’t think you will.”

Not when he cared enough to bring a live snake to the pantheon temple.

He studied her for a moment, and she could practically feel his confusion. What was he thinking? For a brief instant she was tempted to let herself into his thoughts, but she steeled her resolve.

“I guess we’ll see,” he finally said.

They fell into a silence. Troy gazed up at the painting of his ancestor god, with a miserable look on his face. Stella stared blankly at nothing in particular. Suddenly, more

than anything, she wanted to know what her passion was. She would be going off to

college in a few months, starting her adult life, and she had no idea what she wanted to

do.

"How did you know?" she asked.

Troy looked at her. "Know what?"

"That you wanted to be a musician," she explained. She tugged nervously at the hem of

her shirt, then caught herself and pressed her hands against her thighs. "How did you

know you didn't want to be a doctor?"

"I don't know," he answered, unhelpfully. "I guess I've just always known. I've always

turned to music as my escape when everything else seems impossible."

Great. She couldn't think of anything she viewed as an escape. Maybe she wasn't

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supposed to have a passion. If she was, wouldn't she have found it by now? Shouldn't

she at least have some clue by now?

"You heading home?" he asked, clearly oblivious to her deflating mood. "I'll walk with

you and pop in on Phoebe."

She nodded and they headed out of the temple. They didn't speak. Normally Stella

would feel compelled to make small talk, to fill the awkward silence. But right now all

she could think of was finding her passion. It seemed like everyone but she had a passion. Troy had his music. Phoebe had running. Daddy had the school. Her mom had had painting.

What did Stella have?

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"Troy!" Phoebe squealed as he and Stella walked through the front door. Then she noticed Stella behind him and frowned.

If Troy noticed her questioning look, Stella noted, he ignored it and flopped onto the sofa next to her. "Hey Phoebes."

"Omigods," Phoebe said, apparently forgetting her confusion. "You will never believe what I accidentally did today."

As she explained the incident to Troy, Stella glanced around the room, confirming that there had been no Skittles recurrence in her absence. The thought reminded Stella of the jar on her desk, and she held back a smile.

"I'll be in my room," she announced, although she was quite certain neither of them would take notice if she autoported herself to New Guinea. Stella hated feeling like an outsider. She suddenly wished Adara had not gone home for the winter holiday.

She would just have to console herself with Skittles.

Pulling the door shut behind her, Stella kicked off her ballet slippers, grabbed the jar of candy, and sank into her crisp white armchair. As she sat there, popping Skittle after Skittle (wondering whether a single candy would be called a Skittle or a Skittles) and gazing at the quartet of portraits on her bed, a flash of light drew her attention to the door.

When she went to inspect, she found a folded sheet of notebook paper on the floor.

Scowling, she snatched it up and read the messily scribbled note inside.

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The Twelve Days of Stella

10

You'll find it, you know. Your passion.

You just have to keep an open mind.

—T

Stella blinked rapidly at the note until the words started to blur. It took a moment to

realize there were tears in her eyes. Why was she being so emotional today? It wasn't

just Troy's sweet note—Phoebe did have good taste in friends—because she'd felt this

way all day. Crying over the thought of leaving for college, over her mother's paintings

—

Her gaze fell on the paintings and she instantly knew.

How could she have forgotten? She was a truly horrible daughter. Today was the

anniversary of her mother's death. And she hadn't remembered.

Before she could blink Stella was standing in the little cemetery on the east edge of the

island, in front of her mother's grave. She was only more surprised to find her father

already standing there.

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Without saying a word, Stella stepped over to her father and slipped her arms around his waist. His arms came around her shoulders, wrapping her in a warm, safe place.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy," she said, ignoring her tears. "I can't believe I forgot what today was."

"It's all right," he replied, hugging her tight before leaning back. "Your mother would not want us spending our days, our years mourning her. She was too much of a vibrant, vivacious woman to wish us anchored to the past."

Stella forced a watery smile. "I know." An awkward laugh bubbled out. "She would probably want us to forget the date altogether."

"Doubtless," he agreed. "But she would appreciate the fact that we will not."

For several long moments, they stood there—hand-in-hand—gazing at the simple white headstone and lost in their own memories. Stella's focused on painting the mural. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine herself sitting on the floor of her room, surrounded by pots of paint laid out on a spatter-covered drop cloth. Her mother would paint the basic shape and then let Stella paint in the details.

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Even when it looked wretched, she never went back and corrected Stella's work.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said before she realized what she was going to say. “I’d like to

start painting again.”

His hand squeezed hers tighter. “I think that is a marvelous idea.”

She swallowed over the tightness in her throat. “Are her art supplies still __“

“In a box in the basement. Yes, of course.” He gave her one of his knowing smiles. “I

always hoped you would resume painting one day. You loved it so much.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

Finally, she felt the melancholy that had plagued her all day begin to lift. It should feel

odd that her mood would lighten while she attended her mother’s grave, but it didn’t.

Not when it would make her mother smile.

Stella smiled, too.

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After searching the basement for twenty minutes, Stella

finally found the boxes labeled MAYA. As she brushed off

the layer of dust that had accumulated in the last nine

years she wondered what treasures her father had packed

away. The label on the first box read: MAYA—DRESSER.

Her mom’s clothes and jewelry.

Stella started to drift into memories of playing dress-up in

brightly colored dresses and costume jewelry, but pulled herself back into the moment.

She was here with a purpose.

After setting aside the first three boxes, she found the one she wanted. MAYA—ART.

Hefting the box off the floor, Stella autoported upstairs into the dining room. She could

hear Troy and Phoebe in the living room. Rather than venture into the kitchen for a

knife, she neofactured one and sliced open the box.

She found a wealth of art supplies. Brushes tied up in a canvas pouch. Rags and

sponges for texturing. A tackle box full of half-squeezed paint tubes, sketching pencils,

gum erasers, and dozens of other tools.

It smelled like her mom.

The only thing not in the box was a blank canvas. Since she was not about to paint over

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one of her mom’s works, she neofactured one of those, as well.

Though it had been years since she attempted anything more artistic than an intricate

hairstyle, as Stella laid the contents of the box across the table it felt like yesterday her

mom had first taught her how to mix her own colors. Pulling the tubes of acrylic paint

from the bottom of the tackle box, she paused when her hands brushed over a scrap of

parchment.

Stella knew what it would say before she read it.

What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything?

—Vincent van Gogh

Her mother’s favorite quote.

She placed it next to the blank canvas, where it could inspire her as she sought the

courage to attempt her first painting without her mother’s guidance.

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“Hey Stella, are you—?” Phoebe burst into the dining room.

“Whoa.”

Stella didn’t look up from her canvas. Dipping her brush into the bright red paint on her palette, she lifted it to the painting and made a swirling motion with her wrist. An imperfect oval formed among the dozens she had already painted.

“Did you want something, Phoebe?”

“Yeah, I—“ Phoebe shook her head. “I thought you said you didn’t paint.”

Stella added another red oval.

“Oh yeah,” Phoebe said. “Hesper wanted me to ask you to clear the table for dinner. I don’t know how she knew you were in here, though,” she continued. “I was sitting right there in the living room the whole time and never heard you.”

Stella shrugged. “Hesper has the sixth sense.”

“Duh.”

“Tell her I’ll be done in a few minutes.” Swishing her brush in the jar of murky water, she washed off the red and then took a swipe of yellow. “I’ll set the table when I’m

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finished.”

“Okay,” Phoebe said, stepping closer to get a better look at the painting. “This is

beautiful, Stella. Really.”

She pretended the compliment didn’t matter—just continued making brightly colored

ovals on the canvas—but deep down it felt good. Her stomach had been a flutter of

nerves since she laid the first brushstroke. No artist can truly judge her own work, so

what she thought was a lovely composition might look horrendous to the rest of the

world.

Not that the rest of the world mattered to her—this was purely personal—but it was

still nice to hear the praise.

After Phoebe left the room to deliver her message to Hesper, Stella whispered, “Thank

you.”

***

“What did you girls do today?” Stella’s stepmom, Valerie, asked

as she passed the bowl of tzatziki.

Stella stifled a laugh when Phoebe’s cheeks turned bright pink.

Though she usually took every opportunity to find pleasure in

her stepsister’s embarrassing powers mishaps, tonight she was in

a generous mood. Rather than sit back and let Phoebe flounder,

Stella spoke up.

“I started painting again,” she said as she spooned a helping of

the tangy yogurt sauce onto her plate. “Until this afternoon I

hadn’t painted since my mother passed.”

A look of sympathy passed over Valerie’s face, indicating that she knew the significance

of today’s date. For a moment Stella was afraid she would offer some apology or

empathy or something equally pity-induced, but then her gaze shift over Stella’s

shoulder and her face lit up.

“Did you paint that?” she asked, her voice full of awe.

Dipping a small piece of bread into the tzatziki, Stella nodded.

When she’d finally declared the work finished and started clearing off the table for
dinner, she’d set her painting on the buffet behind her chair. She was pleased with the
result—a shower of bright colors against a plaster white background. It captured the
moment perfectly.
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“It’s marvelous,” Daddy declared. “Such vibrant colors.”
“Very abstract,” Valerie added. “What is it?”
Stella smiled. “A rainbow of fruit flavors.”
Daddy and Valerie frowned in confusion. Phoebe sucked in a quick breath. And,
because she was feeling particularly cheeky, Stella made Skittles rain down from above.
(After she drew a protective shield over their heads and their dinner, of course—she did
not want a repeat of her earlier scalp wound.)
“What on earth?” Daddy scowled at the candy downpour.
Valerie gasped. “Phoebe!”
“It wasn’t me this time,” she insisted. “I swear.”
“This time?” Valerie echoed.
When Daddy raised his hands to stop the cascade, nothing happened. He might be a
very powerful hematheos, but Stella knew a few tricks. With one swipe of her hand she
froze every Skittle where it hung.
“I did it,” she announced. Then, with a glance at Phoebe, added, “This time.”
Stella popped the tzatziki-covered bread into her mouth and made the hovering Skittles
disappear.
Nine years ago, she would never have guessed that she could be happy on this date,

this anniversary. She would never have guessed that she would find herself painting

again. And, most of all, she would never have guessed that she would find contentment

in a collaged family. But somehow all of those things had happened. Her mother would

be pleased.

Plus, she had a full jar of Skittles waiting on her desk.

If you enjoyed reading The Twelve Days of Stella, then check out Stella's debut as the evil

stepsister in Oh. My. Gods. and her return in Goddess Boot Camp. Visit teralynnchilds.com

to learn more about Stella, Phoebe, Troy, and everyone on the island of Serfopoula.

While you're there be sure to sign up for TLC's newsletter to get all the good dish first.

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